



Looking

through the Eyes of Injustice:

My Soul's Song to the World

My students' eyes are affixed to the screen as the story of Emmitt Till unfolds. In an instant, his unrecognizable body, one eye gouged out and a bullet to his crushed skull is pulled from the Tallahatchie River. Emmitt's crime? Whistling at or flirting with a white store owner. His assailant's crime? Murder. And the verdict? NOT GUILTY! Amidst gasps and piercing silence, I stand in my classroom grieving for his mother and for him. Amidst gasps and deafening silence, I stand in my room as the civil rights movement marches on. A door is opened into a time period of injustice, unrest, personal tragedies, and victories. Our venue for expression? Poetry.

Poetry is my soul's song to the world. It is my expression of my experiences. In the poem, "I Want to Write," by Margaret Walker, she says, "I want to write the songs of my people" (Jones, 2006). I, too, want to write the songs of my people. Poetry lends itself well to personal/emotional expression. This time in history is personal to me and through poetry, it became personal to my students, and they spoke the emotions of my people and of themselves.

I'm not emotionally attached to any of the units that I teach except this one. I have a selfish reason for teaching this unit. "Here are my people and some of their experiences. Please don't forget them. They've been forgotten for too long." Through my students' viewing of the Civil Right's Move-

ment, I hope to reach their souls and cause them to burn as mine did when my eyes engulfed those piercing images and my ears heard those haunting sounds of racism and injustice. Not only are their souls burning with these images, but, also, with the images and reminders of courage and triumphs in the face of adversity.

"The Movement"

I taught seventh/eighth grade Language Arts in Wesley Chapel, Florida, at Weightman Middle School. I was fortunate to have my students for two years in a process called looping. I taught them in seventh grade and when I taught the Civil Right's Movement and Poetry unit, I then had them in eighth grade as well. In seventh grade, I taught a unit that focused on all of the various prejudices, simply titled "A Unit on Prejudice."

Most of my students (I did get some new students the following year) entered eighth grade with this background. So I began "Poetry and the Civil Rights Movement" by referring back to their seventh grade prejudice unit. We brainstormed their thoughts and knowledge of the Civil Rights movement via KWL. The history teacher on my team integrated lessons with mine at this point in the process.

We decided to partner to create a cohesive view of this time period. She had our students read a news story, "The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow" (*The Tampa Tribune*, 2002), that detailed how one vote makes a difference to signify the importance of the Black vote, the separate but unequal rights that were forced upon Blacks, sanctioned prejudice, a list

of the Jim Crow Laws themselves, and a timeline that showed significant dates and images from 1789 to 2000 along with many more foci of the Jim Crow Laws. This was a preface to their viewing of the *Eyes on The Prize* series.

Our students watched the movie series, *Eyes on the Prize*, which is a PBS series that gives a detailed account of the events, people, places, tragedies, triumphs, and truths of African-Americans through exploration of the 1954 *Brown vs. the Topeka, Kansas, Board of Education* Supreme Court decision that outlawed separate but equal public schools in the United States.

The film series views such issues from the perspective of the mid-1980s, taking the viewers back to the Civil Right's Move-

Figure 1.



"Eyes on the Prize": Six tapes that cover the period from 1954 to 1965.

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Integrating

Poetry and African-American History

**Cassandra
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ment of the 1950s and 1960s (Blackside, 1987). The series, available in two versions as indicated in Figures 1 and 2 below, can be purchased on eBay or amazon.com or through most school resource centers.

The film series is lengthy, so the history teacher and I both had the students view segments in our classes. I gave instructions for viewing in my language arts classroom. Using framed character charts, the students took notes on the African-Americans whose life stories had an impact on them. I modeled this note-taking assignment by showing them my notes on Muhammad Ali (See Table 1 below) They used their notes as information for their first poem.

Poetry at Last!

Memoir of an African-American

A memoir is an impression of a per-

son's life. It is a memory that is shared in poetry form. Normally, when a memoir is written, it is written by the person sharing the memory.

I displayed this definition on the overhead. I had tailored the definition for the specific purposes of this unit. It's a poetry unit, and I wanted their memoirs to have a poetic format or flare. The students' memoirs were written as narratives and with dialogue. Of course many memoirs aren't written this way, but as writers, we can choose the style and format in which we want to write, which gives us the freedom to be creative.

I wrote with the students, on some occasions, throughout the unit so that I

could share myself with them and voice my opinions as well as give them some direction in their writing. I know what you are thinking. Yes, you run the risk of the students copying everything that you do, except, or even your words. This is how some of our most famous people started out as writers, artists, musicians, designers, etc. Everyone has to start somewhere. Besides, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, right?

I didn't write in class with them for the sake of time and so that I would have a copy ready for the day's lesson. Once I went over the definition, I showed them a copy of the memoir that I had written. I chose Emmet Tills because his face and his story will never leave me.

Table 1.
Framed Character Chart for "Civil Rights" Video.

	Event that Occurred Date, & Place	Cause of this Event	Effect of this Event	Others Involved In this Event
Teacher Example: Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali)	He was drafted into the Vietnam War December 1965 and he refused to be drafted	He refused because of his Muslim beliefs and beliefs about war...believed that America was fighting the war for no reason	He was sentenced to five years in prison. The decision of the courts was overturned so he only served two. He lost three years in his boxing career. He started his career again and became the heavyweight champion of the world after he fought & defeated George Foreman in Africa during a fight titled, "The Rumble in the Jungle."	
Student Example: Floyd Patterson	He fought against Muhammad Ali in November 1965 in Las Vegas Nevada	Floyd wanted to defeat Muhammad Ali Floyd always tried to make Muhammad Ali angry by calling him Cassius Clay even after he changed his name to Muhammad Ali	They fought twelve rounds. Muhammad Ali defeated Floyd Patterson. He was quoted saying, "What's my name?" "Say my name!"	Muhammad Ali

Figure 2.



"Eyes on the Prize II": Covers the period 1954 to 1985.

August 1955: Emmett Till was a 14-year-old boy from Chicago visiting his relatives in Mississippi (see Figure 3). After working all day picking cotton, Emmitt went with some friends to buy candy from the store. While in the store, Emmitt allegedly whistled at, or openly flirted with, Carolyn Bryant (the White shop-owner) and this action angered her husband.

Although they were worried at first about the incident, the boys soon forgot about it. A few days later, two men came to the cabin of Mose Wright, Emmitt's uncle, in the middle of the night. Roy Bryant, the owner of the store, and J. W. Milam, his brother-in-law, drove off with Emmitt. Three days later, Emmitt Till's body was found in the Tallahatchie River. One eye was gouged out, and his crushed-in head had a bullet in it (see Figure 4). The corpse was nearly unrecognizable; Mose Wright could only positively identify the body as Emmitt's because it was wearing an initialed ring.

The men were identified and tried. The jury deliberated for just over an hour, then returned a "not guilty" verdict on September 23rd, the 16th anniversary of the signing of the Bill of Rights. (Meranaam Joker, 2005)

This event rocked me to the core and still does when I read about Emmitt Till or see his pictures. I *had* to express my thoughts about this tragedy! I read my memoir to the class with a copy on the overhead projector.

Shootin' the Breeze with My Boys

Man, you want to see a picture of my lady?
"You don't have a lady. You too ugly to have a lady."

I'll prove it! Wah-la

Yeah, and ain't she pretty?

"All right man, you got us there!"

"But, I bet you won't go into that store and say hi to that White lady..."

Oh, that's nothing!

"If you're so big and bad, go do it,

I dare you!"

"I double dare you!"

All I was doing was shootin' the breeze with my boys and didn't know that my life was over the minute I stepped into that store. The streets were dry and dusty. It was the summer of 1954 and Mississippi hadn't seen rain in a couple of days.

I was visiting my uncle for a while and decided to hang out with some local boys. Stepping boldly inside the store, the sweet aroma of candy filled the air. Jumbo cherry licorice selling for a penny a bundle and that luscious peppermint twirl candy that when you put it on your tongue, it evaporated like mist hitting the morning sun...

"Fred, that dusty old nigger spoke to her!"

"He did what?"

"Yeah, looked her square in the eyes, and said, 'Hi!' "

Figure 3.



Emmitt Till

Figure 4.



Emmitt Till

"Who he staying with?"

"They say an uncle..."

"Yessa, what you need?"

"Is Emmitt Tills staying here?"

"Yessa, thas my nephew."

"We'd like a word with him!"

"Emmitt, thays people ta see ya!"

Yes, what is it?

"Boy, we need to talk to you outside!"

Ok...

The night air was thick and musty. As I sat quietly in the rear seat, I knew I would never see my family again...

My body was unrecognizable.

"How could they do this to my son?" These were the piercing words of my mother. She cried until muffled sighs were all she could muster.

The trial lasted for three days. For my mother and family, it felt like three years.

NOT GUILTY...This verdict stayed with my mom for her lifetime...Just shootin' the breeze with my boys...

—Voice of Emmitt Till

By: Cassandra Pierce-Thomas

All of my students were silent. I didn't know whether to have a discussion about my poem, so I took cues from them and in their silence, I allowed them to write their memoirs.

Carl Stokes, the first black mayor of Cleveland, and his story left an impression upon Matt Peters. In his poem, Matt revisits the highs and lows that Carl experienced prior to and after the election.

My Triumph

I am on my way to victory now.

I have tried before, but failed,

and now I will not.

I refuse to.

It will be a difficult fight,

as I knew from the start,

and as I know now,

standing at the podium.

Their stench of distrust fills the air,

and yet I know there are some who believe.

My brothers believe, and now those

very few do, too.

My opponent is fierce, twisting my words, as I feel the malice spout from his lips. I feel more beaten down every day. But then, I see them, the ones who believe, and the burden of acceptance is lifted, for a time.

But I will not fail.

I refuse to.

It is voting day today, and the beads of sweat have left me soaked, as my pacing grows harder.

But then I see them, my brothers, pouring into the voting areas.

and I feel hope.

I have won! I have won!

I am Carl Stokes, the first black mayor of Cleveland.

It is my position.

It is my pride.

It is my triumph.

—Matt Peters

Matt captured this man's fears, doubts, and courage throughout his poem. Through his words, Carl Stokes' memory lives on.

Personal Memoirs

My students may have been asking themselves how these events related to their lives. "What does this have to do with me?" It is in our nature to disregard things that do not relate to us specifically.

I wanted my students to realize that the events that they viewed and were now writing about weren't just stories, but pains, tragedies, and heartbreaks of real human beings. So, I got them to look at their histories by listing as many events as they could remember and to choose the events that were most poignant or had a lasting effect on their lives. This prepared them to write their personal memoirs.

The students chose their most compelling life event and began to write information such as: who was involved, when it happened, how it happened, why it happened, and the outcome. I shared my personal memoir called, "The 14th Visit," which detailed the stillbirth of my firstborn child.

The 14th Visit

11:00 a.m.

Quintero said she had passed.

I just knew he was playing a cruel joke on me...

She had to be alive.

Why wouldn't she be?

This had to be a mistake.

Why wasn't she moving anymore and why can't they find her heartbeat?

I called my husband and told him that he should get down to the office right way and

Our little girl had passed.

I sobbed uncontrollably.

My husband and I sat there as the
doctor explained the events of that
night and the following day.

2:00 p.m.

I sat in my apartment waiting for it all
to begin and end.
Minutes seemed like hours and hours days.
I was just going through the motions...

6:00 p.m.

Checking into the hospital,
Discussing preparations for Angela,
preparing for labor,
preparing for birth,
preparing for death...

9:15 a.m.

May angel -- my adorable sleeping angel.
I loved her so hard.
"God, please give her back to me..."
PLEEEEAASE!!!!!!

11:00 a.m.

Now I had to give her up...
I kissed her
I looked at Robert...
I LET HER GO...

—Cassandra Pierce-Thomas

I experienced the death of Emmitt
Tills as a mother. I lost my baby girl as his
mother lost her 14- year-old baby boy. This
was one of my connections while watching
this series and I hoped that my students
would connect in a similar way. This event
was painful to me, yet I informed the stu-
dents that they could write about an event
that was as personal and as painful as this
one or not.

It is important for me to clarify some-
thing at this juncture. It is not typical for
me, as a teacher, to "put my business" out
there like that, but I could not have taught
this lesson in any other way than for it to
be personal.

The beginning of this unit is poignant
and heart piercing, and after viewing the
series and hearing my poetic responses, I
often felt as if someone had crept into my
classroom and turned on the mute button,
the silence was just that piercing. However,
when I read their poetry, I knew the silence
was reflective instead of nonresponsive.

Matt reflects on his "pain" after tak-
ing a spill in the Rockies in the summer
of '96.

MY PAIN

It was the summer of '96
in the snow-capped peaks of the Rockies.
I should have said no,
But I had little choice.
His name was "Goofy,"
my own angel of death.
I was nervous the whole time
and the rain made it worse.
Down the slopes we went,
and an unfortunate slip

of the horse behind me
sent me flying.
My life flashed before my eyes
and I realized I wasn't gone,
but the pain seared through my body.
I could taste the Colorado soil,
and as the pain went through my arm,
I knew it was broken.
It was hours before I saw any help,
all the way up that mountain,
and I will remember it always,
my pain.

—Matt Peters

This was the most compelling memory
of Matt's life. The most compelling memory
of the Civil Right's Movement for him was
Carl Stokes's victory as Mayor of Clevel-
and—both life events—both very real.

Bio-Poems

A biographical poem captures the es-
sence of a personality. It addresses his or
her challenges, triumphs, and the days in
which he or she lived.

I approached this type of poem by
bringing in an African-American History
calendar that gave summaries of 12 great
African-Americans and their accomplish-
ments. I made duplicates and provided
each group of students a folder with this
information. They read the historical
accounts and decided who they would
write about. I displayed the format on the
overhead, went over each line of the poem,
and the students wrote a class poem about
Jackie Robinson.

Afterwards, the students wrote their
bio-poems and Star Thomas chose Zora
Neale Hurston.

Zora Neale Hurston: Woman of Endurance

Zora
Courageous, bold, unique, straightforward
Liked to put pen to paper
Who felt that she could be a spokesperson
for women
Who tried to shed light on African-
American folk culture

Figure 5.



Attack on Protestors

Who understood that she had a voice
that had to be heard
Who supported feministic views
Who achieved success in writing
many works of fiction
Who failed to be rightfully recognized
during her lifetime
Lived from 1891 to 1960
Hurston

—Star Thomas

Through reading the historical infor-
mation and writing this type of poem, the
students had to glean the essence of that
person's character and portray it through
their poems. Star achieved that objective.

Ecphrastic Poetry

Ecphrastic poetry is when the viewer/
poet "enters into" the spirit and feeling
of the photograph, by describing, noting,
reflecting, or addressing. This is a poetic
response to an image (Gorrell, 2000).

This is an adaptation of Nancy Gor-
rell's poetry lesson shared as part of her
"Curriculum of Peace" in the May 2000
issue of *English Journal*. The day before
this lesson, I had the students find photos
by way of the Internet on the Civil Right's
Movement. They searched using www.google.com or www.askjeeves.com

I had no clue of possible internet sites,
so I suggested these search engines and I
searched along with them. Our school has
a portable i-Book computer lab with print-
ers, so this was quite do-able. This took the
whole class period.

The following day, I prefaced this seg-
ment by discussing the difference between
empathy and sympathy. We talked about
how pictures speak volumes and that they
tell a story all on their own and that we
were going to try to put ourselves into the
shoes of another person via a photograph.

I showed some images of the Civil
Right's Movement and then asked the
students to look at the people, places, or
things in these pictures. I told them to step
inside the photograph and imagine that
they were one of the people or objects there
or be themselves and imagine that they
could speak to someone in the particular
photograph. They were guided to think
about what they would say to the person
or what they would say if they were that
person. They chose their images and gave
a voice to silence. Below is Nick Steece's
choice and he wonders...

Attack on Protestors

Where?
Where is his family to help 'em?
Where is the world to stand up to them?
Why do people look and do not speak?

Where is the freedom that this young
man seeks?

Is he the only one to take a stand?
Aren't you tired, from everything,
of being banned?
Who are these people, these cops?

Where is the yelling of "STOP?"
Where is his family to help 'em?
Where is the world to stand up to them?

—Nick Steece

Nick questions the lack of involvement from anyone. Will Nick become the activist that he expects others should be in the face of injustice? It is my hope that he will.

A Riddle Poem

I define a riddle poem as poetry that defines an object through the use of adjectives and other descriptive words as well as phrases that tell what the object is doing.

After discussing the nature of riddles, I placed this riddle poem on the overhead.

What Am I

I'm a dark brown river
Flowing down a mound
Of white billowing softness
Small brown chunks of rock
Are in my way
Then I come to a white mountain
All of a Sudden I hit a rock
There is a ball of red
at the top

—Unknown Author (McDonald, 1993)

The students took a guess at what the poem was referring to: an ice cream sundae. I brought their thoughts back to the Civil Rights Movement by asking them to think about everything they had seen and heard about "The Movement."

They made a list of all of the people, places, things and ideas pertaining to it. They listed things like segregation, freedom, hatred, injustice, etc. From the list, the students chose the topic of their class poem. These poems are some of my most prized possessions as a teacher.

What Am I?

I am hopes and dreams...
Releasing people and enabling them
to soar...
Loud and Powerful: I unite all of humanity!
Breaking chains and leading the way...
I inspire!
I cast an overwhelming feeling of victory!
—Freedom: by 6th period

What Am I?

I am an intense glare: a violent murderer.
Burning fire escapes from my eyes.
A horrible pain is unleashed onto others.
There is vandalism on my skin and gossip
in my mouth.
My body is bitter with despair and...I
...will....never...Care!
—Hatred by 3rd period

I am well of aware of my students' impressions of this time period. They were precise in illustrating their perceptions through this collaborative effort. I chose these specifically because of their stark contrast which, in my opinion, summarizes The Civil Right's Movement.

Looking Back

I wanted the students to think about the people they encountered, the events, their reactions and thoughts about what they saw and how they responded on this journey of discovery. I had them write a reflection piece expressing what they learned. Chloe's reflection embodies the sentiments of my students as a whole.

"All I can say is I know more than I ever did and it changed my life and understanding of what happened during a time when there was two water fountains—one colored and one white."

—Chloe Letourneau

Now What?

Poetry is my first love of writing, and teaching the history of my people is my passion. The students learned the extreme hatred and abuse of a people in an America

that now seems so far removed from it. They were able to see how hard work and endurance pay off. They also pondered their own place in the world.

It is my hope that they will carry this unit with them and make a difference in their world as an extended response to the exposure of the Civil Right's Movement. I believe that poetry is a soul's song to the world. Hopefully, my students will sing the songs that they have written to a world that has forgotten or never heard it before.

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